

SCHOOL CRISIS PREVENTION AND RESPONSE

NSSC RESOURCE PAPER

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If schools ever were “islands of safety” within otherwise violent neighborhoods, they certainly are no longer. Every type of community across the country — urban, suburban or rural — has experienced “street crime” on school grounds.

This violent crime wave has created an increased awareness of the need for safer schools. There is no longer room for debating whether our campuses should be safer: The issue concerning parents, educators and students is in what way and how quickly campuses can be made more secure.

Even citizens fortunate enough not to experience school-related crime and violence firsthand are deluged with news stories recounting these atrocities.

A recent, horrifying example: On January 17, 1989, a man carrying an AK-47 semiautomatic assault rifle walked onto an elementary school playground in Stockton, California, and opened fire. Less than five minutes later, five children and the gunman were dead; 29 other students and a teacher were wounded, 15 seriously.

The Stockton shooting claimed more lives than any other schoolyard attack in history. However, other incidents of deadly violence are occurring around the country. Although such violence isn't new, its severity is. Other recent examples include:

- September 17, 1993: A man walked onto a school football field, in Sheridan, Wyoming, with a rifle and handgun. He fired at students, wounding four before killing himself.
- January 5, 1989: A 16-year-old student was fatally shot in the yard of Henderson Junior High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.
- September 26, 1988: A 19-year-old opened fire at Oakland Elementary School in Greenwood, South Carolina, killing two 8-year-old girls and wounding nine other people.

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- May 21, 1988: A woman walked into a classroom at the Hubbard Woods Elementary School in Winnetka, Illinois, killed an 8-year-old boy and wounded six others.
- May 16, 1986: A man and woman held a group of students and teachers hostage in a Cokeville, Wyoming, elementary school. Their bomb exploded accidentally, killing the woman and burning some of the hostages. The man committed suicide, but not before shooting one teacher in the back.

Many of the school administrators who had to deal with these incidents met in New York City on September 25-26, 1989, for the “School Crisis Prevention Practicum,” an unprecedented meeting sponsored by the National School Safety Center, an organization funded by the U.S. Department of Justice. Their comments and recommendations about school security, learned by living through tragic incidents at their schools, have been included in this paper.

Although these principals experienced some of the more dramatic incidents to take place on school campuses, the danger of lesser violence is even more pervasive. Three million crimes are committed on school grounds each year, with 183,590 people injured in 1987, according to the National Crime Survey. On any given day, it is estimated — based on results of the 1987 National Adolescent Student Health Survey — that more than 100,000 students carry guns to school. These numbers — and the recent headline-grabbing attacks — have renewed the debate over how much security and what type of security is needed, as well as whether it’s possible to completely protect students from disturbed adults or classmates with guns.

Using metal detectors in schools has become one of the most controversial ways to increase campus security. A pilot program was tested in five New York City schools last year in which a special security task force visits the campuses on a rotating schedule and confiscates weapons found with hand-held detectors. The program, which has expanded to 10 other high schools this year, seems to be working. No guns have turned up in the schools, although approximately 200 weapons have been recovered nearby, apparently dropped by students when they saw the metal detectors.

Some parents protest that students should not automatically be treated as “convicts.” However, a New York City council member defended the metal detector program by saying, “The public need has long since overcome the objections of civil libertarians. People in the school have to be able to go into an arena of safety.”

Although other schools across the country have also installed metal detectors, some officials say the devices are expensive, unnecessary and logistically impractical, especially since a great deal of trouble happens just outside the

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school grounds. Others question the effectiveness of metal detectors. Alex Rascon, director of security for the San Diego Unified School District, points out, “The school is a second home for kids, so they know it better than the administrators. If you have tons of windows in your schools, they can get weapons in one way or the other. They can hide things and you’ll never know.”

Cost is another factor to consider, not only in terms of the hardware but also in terms of the employees who will operate the metal detectors. “The cost of metal detectors is mind-boggling, and the question is still whether we would detect that much,” said District of Columbia school board president Linda W. Cropp.

In fact, money often is raised as a key concern when any new security measure is discussed. For example, California has approximately 7,500 schools and 4.5 million students, with 120,000 to 150,000 new students entering the system each year. Eleven new classrooms must be built each day just to keep up with this boom. State-level school administrators say that even a best-case scenario for the passage of new school bonds does not project enough money being raised to maintain the current level of service. “The security aspect is basically adding a new burden to an already overburdened system,” says William L. Rukeyser, a special assistant to California’s Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Many school districts focus on making their schools’ physical plants more secure by locking all but the front entrance, installing better alarm systems, adding two-way intercoms in all classrooms, closing off little-used stairwells, giving playground and school bus monitors walkie-talkies, and getting rid of separate faculty bathrooms.

Other school districts have decided to build protective structures around their campuses, although some experts point out that the amount of protection offered by construction is limited. “You would have to build a 10-foot brick wall around all the elementary schools in the United States and they’d have to have barbed wire to prevent people from going up and over the brick wall. You’d have to have roving guards and armed police at all times,” says Thomas A. Shannon, executive director of the National School Boards Association.

However, the idea of a walled school has already become a reality at Lindbergh Junior High School in Long Beach, California, where the school district has decided to build a 10-foot-high, 900-foot-long concrete wall between the school and an adjacent housing project to protect students from flying bullets. “To me, it’s sad, but we have to do it,” said Board of Education member Jerry Schultz. “Imagine the trauma to kids of having to evacuate the P.E. field because of bullets. The P.E. teachers said that happens all the time, and they have to have their classes on the other side of the field.”

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Although no one has been hurt during school hours, the sound of gunshots is heard every six to eight weeks, according to Lindbergh school officials. Two years ago, a student playing basketball after school was hit in the chest by a stray bullet and nearly died.

Many parents and teachers are relieved when schools increase security, no matter how it is done. However, others believe that schools are being turned into armed camps, drastically affecting the learning atmosphere. One architect, who designed a high-security school for a Los Angeles neighborhood that was home to 13 street gangs, said, "If you start making a prison environment with 8- to 10-foot-high fences, it certainly changes the character of the school and the quality of the experience that students have while at the school."

Several of his colleagues who worked on an Oakland school's design even considered building watchtowers, but the architect said, "I think the open campus is the preferred model. To create a compound may be necessary, but it's unfortunate. It's not what this country is about."

Administrators also worry that increasing security will make parents feel excluded from the school and that they will then become less involved in their children's education. "We've gone to inordinate lengths to create the image that these are your schools, come on in," said one Chicago superintendent. But now, he says, all entrances except the front door are locked, visitors are treated more suspiciously, and every visitor is asked to sign in and out and wear badges while at the school.

School officials also worry that increased security compounds the fears of children who are already being warned, in and out of school, to be wary of strangers who may kidnap or kill them. "You're communicating to elementary school children that there are really evil, really bad people living in their community and you have to protect them all the time," says Bob Rubel of the National Alliance for Safe Schools. "That's a dangerous signal to give to little kids."

Unfortunately, the world is becoming more dangerous and that reality is affecting the nation's schools. In fact, schools may be an even more likely target for disturbed people than other businesses. A disturbed adult may attack a school because he or she has negative memories of school experiences, realizes the children are vulnerable targets, or wants national publicity and knows hurting children will ensure that.

The Legal Aspects of Crime Prevention

Because of the increasing demand for public safety, many states are beginning to take another look at their laws, particularly as they relate to individual rights of

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privacy. For many school districts, implementing safety plans also addresses concerns about liability. California was the first — and so far the only — state to provide a constitutional right to safe schools. While other states have not yet followed California's example, schools across the country must be more attentive to campus safety because of the impact made by the decade-old victims' rights movement. That movement involved crime victims who began using the civil courts to vindicate their rights. As courts and juries began to be more sympathetic to their cause, a legal trend developed to hold third-party defendants, including schools, liable for injuries sustained by victims of crime and violence.

According to the authors of *School Crime and Violence: Victims' Rights*, courts have held that although a school may not be expected to be a guarantor or insurer of the safety of its students, schools are expected to provide, in addition to an intellectual climate, a physical environment harmonious with the purposes of an educational institution. This expectation is particularly appropriate on a school campus where educators are charged with the care, custody and control of students' behavior.

The developing right to safe schools includes the right of students and staff:

- To be protected against foreseeable criminal activity.
- To be protected against student crime or violence which can be prevented by adequate supervision.
- To be protected against identifiable dangerous students.
- To be protected from dangerous individuals negligently admitted to school.
- To be protected from dangerous individuals negligently placed in school.
- To be protected from school administrators, teachers and staff negligently selected, retained or trained.

Several recent court cases stemming from school security issues illustrate the legal problems that can arise from a crisis, or from efforts to prevent one.

In one case, *Hosemann v. Oakland Unified School District*, Stephen Hosemann argued that he was physically assaulted on his junior high school campus by a former classmate and that school officials, although aware of the threat, failed to protect him. In May 1986, the superior court held the school district and administrators liable for Stephen Hosemann's injuries and ordered the district to develop a security plan for its campuses. The ruling was reversed in May 1989 by an appellate court which, while denying the plaintiff's claims against the school district, did reinforce the need for legislative action to make schools safer.

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In August 1988, a federal appellate court ruled in favor of a student who had been molested by her high school band director. In the case of *Stoneking v. Bradford Area School District*, the court held that the school district violated the student's right to "liberty" under the 14th Amendment because its officials were aware that another student had charged the band director with sexual misconduct but failed to take action.

The case of *New Jersey v. T.L.O.* concerned the legality of student searches conducted by public school officials. It is relevant to crisis prevention since many incidents are perpetrated by students who have carried weapons to school. A New Jersey high school teacher discovered a 14-year-old student, T.L.O., and a friend smoking cigarettes in a school restroom in violation of the school's rules. The girls were taken to the principal's office, where T.L.O. not only denied smoking in the rest-room, but said she didn't smoke at all.

Doubting T.L.O.'s truthfulness, the vice-principal asked to see her purse. He found a pack of cigarettes and cigarette rolling papers in the purse; searching further, he found marijuana, a pipe, plastic bags, \$40 in one-dollar bills, an index card containing the phrase "people who owe me money," and two letters implicating T.L.O. in marijuana dealing.

The state subsequently brought delinquency charges against T.L.O. in juvenile court. The court found that, although the Fourth Amendment does apply to searches by school officials, the search in question was reasonable. The appellate court affirmed the trial court's finding, but the New Jersey Supreme Court reversed the ruling.

The case then went to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled that, although the Fourth Amendment applied to searches of students by school administrators, the evidence against T.L.O. had been obtained legally.

The U.S. Supreme Court concluded that school officials do not have to conform to the same stringent standard required of law enforcement personnel; that is, they do not need to obtain a warrant or reach the standard of probable cause before searching a student. Instead, the court struck a middle position, ruling that school officials must have "reasonable grounds" to suspect a search will turn up evidence that the student has violated the law or the school's rules.

Given these rulings and similar suits that have been filed against other school districts, administrators should closely examine their security systems. They may protect their schools from being found liable in a court case if they can demonstrate that they exercised due diligence in preventing crime and violence on their campuses.

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Although there is no guarantee that a school will ever be completely safe from crime, NSSC recommends these general preventative security measures to lessen the chances of violence occurring on campus:

- School districts should coordinate a local school security committee or task force comprised of school officials, law enforcers, other youth-service providers, parents and students. The committee should plan what safety measures are needed and how they can be implemented, as well as regularly review school safety and security measures.
- School site administrators must acquire “crime-resistance savvy” and take greater responsibility in working with the school board and district to implement site security programs.
- Schools must develop a comprehensive crisis management plan that incorporates resources available through other community agencies.
- A school communications network should be established that links classrooms and schoolyard supervisors with the front office or security staff, as well as with local law enforcement and fire departments.
- School staff should be informed and regularly updated on safety plans through in-service training. The training should include not only the certified staff but also classified staff, including part-time employees and substitute teachers.
- Parents and community volunteers should be used to help patrol surrounding neighborhoods and supervise the campus before, during and after school.
- Access points to school grounds should be limited and monitored during the school day. A single visitor entrance should be supervised by a receptionist or security officer. Visitors must sign in at the reception area and wear an identification pass. Delivery entrances used by vendors also should be checked regularly.
- Students should be taught to take responsibility for their own safety by reporting suspicious individuals or unusual activity on school grounds and by learning personal safety and conflict-resolution techniques.
- Schools should establish a curriculum committee to focus on teaching students non-violence, pro-social skills, conflict resolution, law-related education, and good decision making. A school security committee also should be created to focus on what safety measures need to be implemented and how that can be accomplished.
- School administrators are faced with the challenge of addressing legitimate fears without going to extremes that will damage their campuses’ academic atmosphere. Some of their specific responses include:

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- Last spring, the chancellor of the New York City schools announced that high school students who attacked school employees or carried dangerous weapons would be expelled for the rest of the school year.
- At Fairfax Elementary School in Mentor, Ohio, teachers prepare students to duck under their desks when they shout “earthquake drill!” The phrase is a euphemism for the horrific possibility of an armed intruder; the code is used to keep from alarming children unnecessarily. In Oakland and Los Angeles, teachers even conduct bullet drills, training students how to take cover should gunfire erupt.
- Several schools get parents involved in security. In Winnetka, Illinois, where a mentally ill woman entered unchallenged through an elementary school’s rear entrance to kill one boy and wound five others, mothers now take turns sitting in the reception area and screening all visitors. In Cornwall, New York, parents are paid to patrol the high school halls. At Bassett High School in La Puente, California, parent patrols have been used since 1981 and crime has fallen by half.
- School administrators at La Puente’s Bassett High also removed student lockers to eliminate hiding places for guns or drugs. Other schools have banned baggy clothing and book bags that can conceal weapons.
- In addition to requiring that visitors wear badges, some schools also issue every student an identification card that is checked by security guards.
- The San Diego Unified School District is gradually replacing chain link fence with ornamental wrought iron. Security Chief Rascon explains, “Ornamental iron fencing beautifies the campus. Since it doesn’t give you the prison look, you can make the fence higher and people don’t care. We’ve gone from 10 feet to 15 feet. You can’t cut holes in ornamental iron — you’d have to bring a torch — and you can’t climb those fences as easily as chain link fences.”
- Rascon instituted another unusual security measure in 1974: He turned out the schools’ lights at night. “We had total darkness in schools after hours and saved the district \$2 million,” he says. “It was a radical move because we had been brainwashed by electric companies for years that the more lights, the less crime. We have proven that’s wrong. To the contrary, I think lights help a burglar to see so he knows where the equipment is. We’ve told the community, if you see a light come on, call the police. And it clicks, it really does. A dark and silent school is effective against crimes of property.”
- Police officers in Greenwood, South Carolina, where a gunman went on a killing rampage last fall, now “adopt” schools. Officers regularly visit campuses, eating lunch with students and walking the grounds.

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- In Detroit, police officers are stationed at high schools and a 24-hour hotline is available for tipsters with warnings about school violence. Other urban school districts have found that a school police force serves as a useful deterrent as well. “The streetwise kids know who the police are and, if there are more police at the school sites, your very presence makes a difference,” says Joe Elmore, a police officer with the San Diego Unified School District. “They will not do things they would normally do if you weren’t around. The uniform and the police car have a clear psychological effect.”
- Work with the juvenile court judge to develop court orders that allow the school, law enforcement agencies and courts to release information to each other regarding any minor who is, or is believed to be, a gang member.

Even before the shooting at Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton, California, school officials held frequent emergency drills, a factor that helped when a real crisis occurred, says principal Patricia Busher. “All children must be taught that if they’re on the playground or in the classroom and something makes them feel uncomfortable or unsafe, they need to look for the first adult and follow their directions,” she says. “I’m quite convinced that saves children’s lives. When the shooting occurred on our campus, there was no hysterical behavior on the part of the children. They were very, very frightened and traumatized, but they did follow the adults’ directions. You must really run a tight ship and treat your drill seriously.”

Busher is currently working with nearby residents to establish a neighborhood watch around the school; under this plan, people who are often at home agree to notify police if they see suspicious strangers near the school. She also suggests that every school conduct a security analysis of its campus.

The Little Rock, Arkansas, school district established a task force on safety and security shortly after one student was shot and killed on campus and another student, in an unrelated incident, was shot and wounded on a school bus.

Among their recommendations:

- Maintain clean buildings and grounds, pruning overgrown shrubs and trees to eliminate possible hiding places. Keep windows in classroom doors free of posters. Install convex mirrors in blind halls so that administrators and teachers can see around corners.
- Establish a crime prevention club, similar to neighborhood watch. Offer monetary rewards of \$20 to \$25 to students who give an accurate tip on weapons in schools (while maintaining the student’s confidentiality).
- Establish a neighborhood child protection strategy with community members who volunteer their homes as safe houses where children can go if they are threatened on the street or at a bus stop.

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- Work with the prosecuting attorney to develop a timely method of issuing warrants for juvenile offenders' arrests.

Other prevention strategies have been outlined in the *School Safety Check Book*, published by the National School Safety Center.

Preventing Crime through Environmental Design

If a school district is planning to build a new school, architectural design can take security issues into account, points out Dr. Robert Watson, superintendent of the Greenwood, South Carolina, school district where two children were killed and nine other people wounded by a teenage gunman.

"Thirty years ago, the concept of school safety was to lock the doors and windows," he says. "Visual access by the school supervisors is terribly important to maintaining control. Schools need to be designed so that the supervisors have maximum visual access and can see down several hallways from one point. I think a school shaped like a wheel, with the supervisor's office in the hub and halls radiating out like spokes, is the best design. Also, windows need to be designed so that people can use them for evacuation."

Timothy D. Crowe, author of *Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design*, points out that the traditional design concepts used to deter crime — access control and surveillance strategies — emphasized mechanical crime prevention techniques, such as guards, locks, police patrols and lighting, and overlooked use of the physical environment itself. Recently, a shift has been made to prevent crime by using natural opportunities presented by the environment.

Physical space can be evaluated by using the "Three-Ds" as a guide: designation, definition and design. Specifically, he would ask the following questions: Does the space clearly belong to someone or some group? Is the intended use clearly defined? Does the physical design match the intended use? Does the design provide the means for normal users to naturally control the activities, to control access and to provide surveillance?

Crowe writes, "Natural access control and surveillance will promote more responsiveness by users in protecting their territory (e.g., more security awareness, reporting, reacting) and promote greater perception of risk by offenders."

Despite these and similar precautions, however, the unthinkable-- a bomb threat that turns out to be real, an adult intruder with a gun--does happen. Handling such emergencies effectively requires planning and training. The most important step is to develop a written crisis plan and to familiarize school staff with it.

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Many of the following suggestions have now been implemented by school districts that have faced a crisis in the past.

Assigning Clear Roles

In developing a crisis plan, the first step is to assign specific roles to individual staff members that they will take on if an emergency occurs. Personnel should be designated:

- To go to the hospital or emergency medical site where injured students have been taken.
- To oversee telephones and computer datalines.
- To inform administrators in other schools about the emergency and how it is being dealt with.
- To work with the media.
- To oversee transportation needs.
- To assist in identifying students and adults who may be injured or killed.
- To review student and personnel records and notify parents and spouses.

Administrators should describe in writing what needs to be done and who is responsible for each task.

Also, keep on hand both a list of who has keys to which buildings and a floor plan that shows room numbers and the locations of windows, doors, storerooms, restrooms and offices.

Communications

Communications is one of the most critical problems administrators face in an emergency. In a tense situation, rumors multiply quickly and have the potential to panic students and the public. Typically, school officials will have to communicate accurate information to students, parents, staff, law enforcement personnel, emergency medical services, the media and hospitals. The following equipment could prove vital, depending on the nature of the crisis:

- A modern intercom system so that the principal can communicate with all classrooms from most school locations. Beverly Cook, principal of Atlantic Shores Christian School in Virginia Beach, Virginia, had to deal with a student who brought a gun to school, shot a teacher and threatened a classroom of other students. "When a library aide came into the office and said that someone was shooting into a classroom, the secretary called 911 and I went from room to room, telling the children in each class to lie

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down,” she recalls. “Right now we’re in the process of a building program, and an intercom or some kind of communication system will be a must because of the panic I felt at first of how to let everyone know.”

- Cleveland Elementary’s Patricia Busher concurs: “In our case, all the adults exercised very good judgment. Nobody panicked or tried to evacuate, but there were classrooms with no intercoms hooked up and no way to communicate with them immediately. Had those teachers acted differently, the situation could have been far worse.”
- At least one private unlisted telephone line designated for official use during an emergency. In addition, at least two lines with published numbers available for public use.
- A fax machine, a computer with a modem, and RJ11 telephone jacks so that alternate communication systems are available.
- A portable telephone to use in case phone lines are disabled.
- A working bullhorn that can be used to communicate to large groups of people.
- A computer-based bulletin board system (BBS) that schools can access through telephone modems.
- An emergency communication kit that includes a local telephone directory, a list of emergency telephone numbers, a fax machine, and computer telephone numbers.
- Telephone recording equipment that can be used to tape a phoned bomb threat.
- Two-way radios to communicate with school personnel. Note, however, that such radios should *not* be used after receiving a bomb threat, since they can detonate electric blasting caps.

Bomb threats create special communication problems. Again, being prepared is key to handling a bomb threat effectively. Since most bomb threats come by telephone, a standard Bomb Threat Report Form should be created and kept handy for anyone likely to receive such a threat. The form should include a checklist that asks for the basics: where and when the threat was received, a record of the threatening message, and a description of the caller.

Because it’s difficult to keep a cool head when faced with such a threat, the form should also list some questions to be asked, such as: Where is the bomb to explode? Where is the bomb right now? What kind of bomb is it? What does it look like? Why did you place the bomb? Where are you calling from? Who are you? Although the caller probably will not answer every question, asking them will give you more information and more time to classify the voice.

The checklist should also include categories the answerer can check off to describe the caller's voice: male/female, calm/ agitated, young/middle-aged/old, American/accented/disguised, sure/unsure, giggling/sincere, slow/fast, loud/soft, normal/ stuttering/lisping/slurred/clear, or angry/crying/excited. The answerer should also note if the voice sounded familiar and, if so, who it sounded like, and what kind of background noise could be heard.

Transportation

Staff training programs should include bus drivers, who might have to transport students or adults in an evacuation. All school buses should include an emergency information kit that has writing paper, pens and pencils, and a current list of students who ride the bus for each route.

Identification

Identification badges should be made for all district and school staff who would be involved in handling an emergency. Staff members should wear those badges throughout the crisis.

Also, the names of injured students or employees being removed from an emergency site should be on a list kept at the site. The names of the injured should either be written on the back of a hand or on a stick-on label which can be placed on their clothing.

Train teachers to take their gradebooks or class rosters with them if they leave the building in an emergency. Plan what specific part of the campus teachers should take their students to.

Establish a procedure by which children will be released to their parents or guardians after calm is restored. "Reuniting children with their parents took about three hours," recalls Cleveland Elementary principal Busher. "We brought each class, one at a time, into the multipurpose room and then called the parents of the children in that class to come in. It had to be agonizing for the many parents who had to wait and wait, but the alternative is mass hysteria. You can't release a crowd of hundreds of people. I also gave explicit directions that no child could be taken by a parent unless they were signed out and we verified that the child had been handed over to the appropriate person, a parent or guardian."

Dealing with the Media

Administrators faced with a crisis will very quickly be faced by members of the press as well. It's necessary both to be sensitive to reporters' need to get information and communicate it to the public and to consider students' safety and well-being. Two principals who had to deal with the media — one when a third-grade student at his school was killed, the other when a female student was abducted and killed — offer the following advice:

- Keep statements brief and cover only the facts, not opinions.
- Maintain a positive attitude. Remember that the public has a right and a need to understand what has happened.
- Ignore abrasive personalities or statements made by reporters.

Both principals were the spokesmen for their respective schools. One allowed the media to talk to students and teachers if the reporters stayed in front of the school and the students and teachers were on their own time; the other did not give the press access to parents, teachers or students.

According to Walter D. St. John, a high school principal and communications consultant, other ways to prepare for media attention include:

- Compile a list of names, phone numbers and addresses of media representatives and have a stack of addressed envelopes ready to mail press releases.
- Develop a fact sheet about the district and school to use as a handout.
- Maintain an adequate supply of news release forms.
- Identify suitable facilities where reporters can work and news conferences can be held.

He adds, "Information should be shared as soon as possible, as rumors and incorrect information spread amazingly quickly. If there is undue delay, and if the public suspects a cover-up, the resultant mistrust may destroy credibility. It is a good idea to schedule regular briefings to update the media and to reassure employees."

His tips on what *not* to do include:

- Don't panic.
- Don't lie or be perceived as covering up.
- Don't overreact or exaggerate the situation, but don't refuse to acknowledge its gravity either.
- Don't try to avoid blame by using a scapegoat.

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- Don't argue with reporters.
- Don't deviate from communications policy and agreed-upon statements.
- Don't bluff, ad-lib, or talk "off the record."
- Don't delay sharing what information you have, but make sure you are sharing facts.
- Don't project a primary interest in protecting the school's reputation at all costs.

The effects of a crisis often reverberate long after the incident itself is over. School administrators must take a long-term view of dealing with a crisis, say mental health professionals. They note that children need to talk about any crises they experience, since expressing their frustration and fears, as well as trying to understand why the event occurred, are important parts of the healing process. In addition, educators and parents should realize that many psychological symptoms associated with trauma may not appear for weeks or months after the incident.

Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms

Drs. Robert S. Pynoos and Kathi Nader, Directors of UCLA's Prevention Intervention Program in Trauma, Violence and Sudden Bereavement in Childhood, have counseled children who have experienced violence, including a sniper attack and a hostage taking and bombing at separate elementary schools. They write: "Our findings provide strong evidence that acute posttraumatic stress symptoms result from violent life threat, and the severity is related to the extent of exposure to the threat or the witnessing of injury or death."

Such symptoms include nightmares, startled reactions to loud noises, the inability to concentrate in school, guilt over survival or failure to intervene, and fears about a recurrence of the traumatic incident. Some symptoms, such as guilt, may occur whether or not the child was present during the incident. Children have also complained of feeling less interest in play or other usually enjoyable activities and of feeling more distant from their parents or friends.

Young children may re-enact the experience in their play, while older children may adopt risky behaviors in response to the crisis. Students may also try to avoid the area where the incident took place. Other reminders, not related to the incident site, may also trigger anxiety. For example, seeing a potential weapon, such as a kitchen knife, or blood from a minor cut can act as a stimulus. A number of children and their parents have reported that television violence can also serve as a traumatic reminder.

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Counseling can be offered individually, with other family members, and in the classroom. Teachers and school nurses can help pinpoint students who need further help by observing changes in classroom behavior or repeated trips to the nurse's office, referring those students to counselors, and following the course of seriously affected children. The most common behavioral change is unexpected aggression, which can result in the diagnosis of conduct disturbance. While not as usual, children may also refuse to participate in class and exhibit other inhibited behavior as a result of the trauma.

The Grief Process

Studies have shown that children mourn much as adults do: The process of disbelief, anger and pain is similar and often lasts for a year. However, children do experience grief somewhat differently because of their age. Teachers and parents should be aware of those differences in order to help children deal with their feelings.

For example, children sometimes have dreams about a deceased person that frighten them; they interpret the dream as a sign of the return of the dead or the appearance of a ghost. Children are often confused, frightened and disturbed by their grief reactions but, unlike adults, they often don't talk about their feelings with anyone. The process is complicated further when children must deal with a violent death; in fact, overcoming the trauma of witnessing a violent event can interfere with the grief process.

It is important for teachers to talk with students in class about death and their feelings of loss, and for parents to openly acknowledge the loss and talk to their children about their sadness or anger.

Worry About Another

Children often feel extreme stress about the safety of parents, siblings or friends during a violent incident. This can lead to symptoms of separation anxiety, centered on the person they worried about, after the incident is over. For example, a child who was concerned about a sibling may secretly keep track of that sibling's whereabouts, insist that the sibling not go out alone, or panic if the sibling is out of sight.

If children are insecure about a parent's or sibling's safety, they may become irritable with the other person, sometimes even rejecting him or her, as a way of distancing themselves from the painful feelings of worry. This can cause continued strife within the family. Parents can help by reassuring their child about the safety of family members, being supportive when the worries intensify, and encouraging the child to talk about his or her feelings.

Setting Up Counseling Centers

According to mental health experts, schools should take certain steps before, during and after an emergency situation, such as determining what mental health resources will be available and knowing which community and district mental health professionals to call during an emergency, training school staff in grief counseling, keeping the school open for counseling and information the day of the incident and several days afterward, and offering counseling services for weeks and months after the event.

After the Stockton shooting, for example, the school opened a counseling center for parents in a nearby church and set up a 24-hour hotline to take calls from families dealing with the aftereffects of the tragedy. The shooting at Hubbard Woods Elementary School in Winnetka, Illinois, took place near the end of the school year. The school set up weekly meetings for the parents for three weeks after the shooting where they could ask questions about what to expect in terms of their own and their children's emotional reactions to the incident. Several other meetings were held throughout the summer as well.

Posttraumatic stress symptoms can last for as long as two years after a crisis, a point that Cleveland Elementary principal Busher emphasized: "I find that people who are removed from the situation sometimes have a real lack of understanding. They feel that the incident is over, so why are people not going on about their lives, business as usual? That's really not possible."

A resurgence of symptoms can be triggered by anniversaries or other school crises around the country. "We began the new school year with a breakfast at the beach for all the parents and children. We all watched the sunrise, kind of a new beginning. And now we've dealt with May 20, the anniversary of the shooting," says Hubbard Woods Elementary principal Richard Streedain. "But we did have some setbacks. The Stockton shooting was real painful to the parents. It triggered a lot of anxiety when one of these major events happened, which they thought would never happen again."

It's important to remember that counseling should be offered to school staff and officials as well as to parents and children. As Drs. Pynoos and Nader note, "The administrators' visibility is important for providing a sense of security and stability. Because of their high level of immediate responsibility, these leaders may be at risk of a delayed response after the return to normal school operations. Special care has to be given to providing them appropriate psychological assistance at this later date." He adds that children often carefully observe their teachers' responses to an event, making staff recovery doubly important, since it is necessary both in terms of their own welfare and that of their students.

Emphasizing the School's Safety After a Crisis

If possible, school should reopen the day after a crisis, many principals and administrators agree. “We wanted to let the children know the school was safe and to begin dealing with the tragedy,” says Cleveland Elementary principal Busher. “I think had we closed the school, it is likely that some people would have been so traumatized with fear that it would have been very difficult to get children back into school and there would have been potential for a flight pattern.” The school’s maintenance personnel worked all night to remove traces of the shooting so that children would not see bloodstains or bullet holes the next morning. Paying attention to physical details can also help students deal with the trauma. Hubbard Woods Elementary principal Streedain says, “We painted and carpeted the room where the shooting took place and moved our classes around a little bit so this doesn’t get to be known as the second-grade classroom where some kids got shot.”

However, he adds that reassuring parents and children that their school is still safe also depends on their perception of the school before the crisis took place. “If the school has already been perceived as a safe haven, you can revisit that when you have a crisis,” he says. “The more people have a sense of real genuine community, the more effective the healing will be.”

In recent years, several cases of suicide clusters involving young people have received national attention and been the cause of great concern. Although such clusters are not a single-incident crisis, such as a shooting or bombing, they are traumatic and have the potential to spin out of control if not controlled quickly through the use of an established crisis plan.

The Centers for Disease Control define a suicide cluster as a group of suicides or suicide attempts, or both, that occur closer together in time and space than would normally be expected in a given community. Although many think that clusters occur through a process of “contagion” — in which suicides that occur later in the cluster were influenced by the earlier suicides — this theory has not been formally tested.

Some groups of suicides may occur at approximately the same time simply by chance. However, even these pseudo-clusters can create a crisis atmosphere in the communities in which they occur and cause intense concern on the part of parents, students, school officials and others.

The CDC recommend that the following steps be taken to respond to a suicide cluster:

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- A coordinating committee should be formed with individuals from schools, public health and mental health agencies, local government, suicide crisis centers and any other appropriate organizations. The committee would be responsible for developing a response plan and deciding when to implement it. One agency should be designated as the plan's "host agency"; the individual from that agency would be responsible for establishing a notification mechanism, maintaining the response plan, and calling committee meetings.
- The community should also identify and seek help from other community resources, including hospitals and emergency rooms, emergency medical services, local academic resources, clergy, parents groups such as the PTA, survivor groups, students, police and the media.
- The CDC comment, "It is particularly important that representatives of the local media be included in developing the plan. ... Although frequently perceived to be part of the problem, the media can be part of the solution. If representatives of the media are included in developing the plan, it is far more likely that their legitimate need for information can be satisfied without the sensationalism and confusion that has often been associated with suicide clusters."
- The response plan should be used either when a suicide cluster occurs in the community or when one or more deaths from trauma occur (especially among adolescents or young adults) that the coordinating committee members think may influence others to attempt or complete suicide. The plan may also be implemented because of an outside factor, such as a local economic depression, which could lead to an increased number of suicides.
- If the plan is to be implemented, each group involved should be notified.
- The crisis response should be conducted in a manner that avoids glorifying the suicide victims and minimizes sensationalism.
- Persons who may be at high risk--including parents, siblings, boyfriends/girlfriends and close friends--should be identified and have at least one screening interview with a trained counselor. They should be referred for further counseling or other services as needed.
- A timely flow of accurate, appropriate information should be provided to the media. One person should be appointed information coordinator so that a single account of the situation is presented. Although the suicide method should be identified, the precise nature of the method used should not be given in detail.
- Environmental elements that might increase further suicides or suicide attempts should be identified and changed. For example, if the suicide victim jumped off a bridge, building or cliff, barriers should be erected. If a

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victim committed suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning in a particular garage, access to the garage should be monitored.

- Common characteristics among the victims in a suicide cluster may bring up long-term issues that should be addressed. For example, if the victims were not suspected of having any problems, a system should be developed to give help to troubled persons before they reach the stage of suicidal behavior. If the victims tended to be outside the community mainstream, efforts should be made to bring other such people into the community.

James Walker, assistant superintendent of North Salem High School in North Salem, New York, had to deal with the related suicides of two high school seniors and found that it was helpful to divide the senior class into small groups so that students could discuss their feelings about the deaths. In addition, he met with the school's peer counselors the morning before the first death was announced and encouraged them to refer any students who were having a particularly bad time dealing with the situation to the appropriate adult counselors.

Finally, Walker suggests that other administrators who have to deal with such a situation remember to pay attention to their staff members' feelings, as well as the students' feelings. "It was a tough time and our team of people — the counselors, psychologists, the social worker and myself — were involved in this over the course of several months," he says. "I wound up bringing in someone to talk with us, not to learn more about suicides, but to give us a chance to share our frustrations and feelings, to debrief a little bit, and to help us put things in perspective."

Dr. David C. Clark, executive director of the Center for Suicide Research and Prevention, offers school officials additional advice about dealing with student suicides. "I think it is a mistake for a school to close the day following a suicide. In this way the students are left to their own devices at the precise time when they are most upset and overwhelmed by their feelings, and the opportunity for a rumor mill to greatly distort the actual events is inadvertently encouraged," he writes.

"It is also a mistake to announce the suicide over the school loudspeaker system. ... The loudspeaker system is impersonal and ought not to be used in crisis situations unless it is necessary for safety considerations. Use of the public address system increases the likelihood that no one will have prepared the school faculty for the announcement beforehand, increases the likelihood that faculty will be as unprepared for catastrophic announcements as the students, and thus minimizes the likelihood that the faculty will be able to help exert a positive influence on student reactions by way of example."

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Dr. Clark also is opposed to awarding suicide victims posthumous tributes, such as diplomas or varsity letters, or of eulogizing a student who dies by suicide any differently than those who die in other ways. Such actions can lead to the perception that the school administration is condoning or sensationalizing the suicide. Also, excusing students from school to attend the funeral “may inadvertently encourage those not strongly affected by the suicide to become more involved, promote free and unsupervised time away from school when it will do the most harm, and deprive school personnel of the opportunity to monitor individual student reactions to the tragedy,” he writes.

The possibility of an armed intruder, serious bomb threat or suicide cluster may seem remote. But even without such a major crisis, schools are subject to a number of other potentially disruptive events. Being prepared for crises can enhance the school’s effectiveness in responding to smaller incidents. These tragic examples of just the last few years show that no school — large or small, rural or urban — is immune to such crises. To protect against an intruder armed with a gun or a bomb, school administrators should analyze and, when necessary, redesign their campuses to make illegal entry as difficult as possible and should develop a crisis plan so that each staff member knows what to do in an emergency. To prevent suicide clusters, school officials must coordinate community agencies and learn the most psychologically effective ways to deal with a student’s death.

It is an unfortunate fact of modern life that we can no longer assume that schools are sanctuaries. Today’s challenge is to protect students as much as possible in an increasingly violent world.

Organizations

Prevention Intervention Program in Trauma, Violence and
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The National Committee on Youth Suicide Prevention

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Youth Suicide National Center
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American Association of Suicidology
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Denver, CO 80222
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Department of Health and Human Services
Public Health Service
Centers for Disease Control
Atlanta, GA 30333

Publications

Bomb and Physical Security Planning, available at no cost from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, Department of the Treasury, Room 2209, 1200 Pennsylvania Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20226, (202) 566-7395.

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